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Pragmatism in the Religious Thought of William James

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PRAGMATISM IN THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT
OF WILLIAM JAMES

by

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of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
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LIFE

Thomas Francis Ankenbrandt, S.J., was born in Cleveland, Ohio, January 6, 1930.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION Purpose of the thesis--Pragmatic aspects of James's religious thought--Three cardinal points in James's religious pragmatism--Procedure.	1
II. JAMES'S PRAGMATIC METHOD First of the three cardinal points--Pragmatic method espoused in 1898--Credit to Charles S. Peirce-- <u>Pragmatism</u> published in 1907--Stress on practical consequences.	3
III. JAMES'S THEORY OF TRUTH Second of the three cardinal points--Theory of truth the foundation for the pragmatic method--Process of verification--James's pragmatic view of experience.	11
IV. THE WILL TO BELIEVE Third cardinal point in James's religious pragmatism--The will to believe--Connection with pragmatic theory of truth--Belief creates its own verification.	21
V. VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE Pragmatic view of experience in the <u>Varieties</u> --James's conception of religion--Practical consequences--The will to believe and religious experience--Intellect's failure in religion.	39
VI. CONCLUSIONS Pragmatic norm the basis of James's religious system--Errors on belief and truth.	67

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present thesis is to trace the pragmatic method of William James as one of the fundamental themes of his system of religious thought. It is evident that the religious system of James is a vast and circuitous field. An exhaustive treatment of James's analysis of religious consciousness would have to include pragmatism, pluralism, radical empiricism, free will and the "finite god."

The present thesis does not pretend to analyze James's entire treatment of religious consciousness. Attention will be centered on the pragmatic aspects of his religious thought; then special applications will be made to James's religious treatise, The Varieties of Religious Experience.¹

It will become evident that James's pragmatic method involves a very definite pragmatic theory of truth. In the religious sphere, it will be shown that the pragmatic method and theory of truth are connected with the crucial doctrine of the will to believe. Thus James's religious pragmatism revolves around

¹William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (New York, 1902).

three hinges or cardinal points of reference. First, there is the pragmatic method. Second, there is the pragmatic theory of truth. Third, there is the will to believe. A fruitful discussion of James's religious pragmatism must look into these three cardinal points and explore the connections between them.

The path to be followed is clear. The subsequent chapters will sketch (1) the pragmatic method of James; (2) the pragmatic theory of truth; (3) the will to believe; and (4) the pragmatic elements as manifested in The Varieties of Religious Experience. The first three topics will be treated rather briefly and as an introduction to the Varieties. The pragmatic elements in the Varieties will be discussed more at length. The result of the inquiry will be a deeper understanding of the pragmatic method as a strong undercurrent in the religious thought of William James.

CHAPTER II

JAMES'S PRAGMATIC METHOD

The pragmatic method is the first of three cardinal points of reference in James's religious pragmatism. What does James mean by the pragmatic method?

The most highly-developed statement of the pragmatic method is contained in James's book, Pragmatism, published in 1907.¹ There he tells us that the pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise could be interminable. "The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?"² If one can trace no practical difference whatever, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing.

Before proceeding to a further delineation of James's pragmatism, it is necessary to point out that his account of pragmatism in 1907--while clear and final--was not his first statement

¹William James, Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (New York, 1907).

²Ibid., p. 45.

on the subject. It would be illogical to apply a doctrine developed only in 1907 to the Varieties which was published in 1902.

The difficulty does not materialize, however, when one realizes that James's first lengthy public statement on pragmatism occurred in 1898--four years before the publication of the Varieties. The occasion was an address to the Philosophical Union of the University of California.³ In this address James expressed his indebtedness to Charles S. Peirce:

I will seek to define with you merely what seems to be the most likely direction in which to start upon the trail of truth. Years ago this direction was given to me by an American philosopher whose home is in the East, and whose published works, few as they are and scattered in periodicals, are no fit expression of his powers. I refer to Mr. Charles S. Peirce, with whose very existence as a philosopher I dare say many of you are unacquainted. He is one of the most original of contemporary thinkers; and the principle of practicalism--or pragmatism, as he called it, when I first heard him enunciate it at Cambridge in the early '70's--is the clue or compass by following which I find myself more and more confirmed in believing we may keep our feet upon the proper trail.⁴

It is evident from this quotation that James did not regard himself as the originator of pragmatism. It is also clear that James definitely espoused pragmatism in 1898, and heard about it before 1875.

Analysis must now be made of several essential ideas contained in James's important statement of 1898. These essential

³William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," in Collected Essays and Reviews (New York, 1920), pp. 406-437.

⁴Ibid., p. 410.

ideas will recur in the Varieties (1902) and in Pragmatism (1907).

Peirce maintained that the soul and meaning of thought is always directed towards the production of belief. Belief is the concluding beat which ends a musical phrase in the symphony of man's intellectual life. For Peirce, beliefs are really rules for action. The whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. "If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance."⁵ The same thought may be clad in different words; but if the different words suggest no different conduct, they are mere accretions and do not change the meaning. If a man wishes to attain perfect clearness in his thoughts of an object, he need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve--what sensations can be expected and what reactions may occur. Man's conception of these effects is the whole of the conception of the object.

These thoughts of Peirce seemed acceptable to James with a slight qualification. James insists that the principle of Peirce should be expressed with a more encompassing view of future experience:

The ultimate test for us of what a truth means is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires. But it inspires that conduct because it first foretells some particular turn to our experience which shall call for just that conduct from

⁵Ibid., p. 411.

us. I should prefer for our purposes this evening to express Peirce's principle by saying that the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying rather in the fact that the experience must be particular, than in the fact that it must be active.⁶

Thus in 1898 James definitely adopted the central position of the book, Pragmatism, which was to appear in 1907. Suppose that there are two different philosophical propositions which seem to contradict each other, and about which men dispute. If one supposes the first proposition to be true, and can foresee from it no conceivable practical consequence different from what would be foreseen if the truth of the other were supposed, then the difference between the two propositions is specious and verbal. If, however, the two propositions have distinct practical consequences, then they take on vital meaning in man's struggle through life.

For example, theism and materialism do have distinct practical consequences in man's experience. For James, simple rational argumentation does not solve the constant struggle between theism and materialism. One must look to the particular consequences flowing from the acceptance of theism or materialism. Materialism is not "a permanent warrant for our more ideal interests, not a fulfiller of our remotest hopes."⁷ The notion of God,

⁶Ibid., p. 412.

⁷Ibid., p. 422.

on the other hand, guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. "A world with a God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of Him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that where He is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things."⁸ The materialist is really denying that the moral order is eternal, and cuts off ultimate hopes; the theist is really affirming an eternal moral order with definite hope of ultimate victory in the life-struggle. These are the distinct practical consequences of theism and materialism.

The essential ideas of James's pragmatism of 1898 have now been sketched. They coincide with the central thought of Pragmatism which was published nine years later. During those nine years James thought over his fundamental pragmatic norm and gathered examples and further argumentation to back up his position. Attention must now be centered on the book Pragmatism in an attempt to gain deeper understanding of the pragmatic method as understood by James.

James's own suggestion is pertinent here. "To take in the importance of Peirce's principle, one must get accustomed to applying it to concrete cases."⁹ Chemists have long discussed the

⁸Ibid., p. 423.

⁹William James, Pragmatism, p. 48.

inner constitution of certain tautomeric bodies. (Tautomerism in general is the phenomenon shown by certain substances of possessing more than one chemical structure). Some chemists said that an unstable hydrogen atom oscillated inside of the tautomeric bodies; other scientists maintained that these bodies are unstable mixtures of two bodies. But this dispute is really no dispute at all, says James, since no particular experimental fact can be made different by one or the other view being correct.¹⁰

One may also apply the pragmatic method to the free-will problem. What does free will mean pragmatically? "Free-will pragmatically means novelties in the world, the right to expect that in its deepest elements as well as in its surface phenomena, the future may not identically repeat and imitate the past."¹¹ Thus free will becomes a general cosmological theory of promise for James. It is a melioristic doctrine. Man with a free will can struggle along towards possible improvement. Determinism breeds pessimism and sings the sad refrain that necessity and impossibility alone rule the destinies of the world. Both free will and determinism take on vital meaning since they have distinct practical consequences.

Consider the philosophical notion of substance. James again leans towards empirical analysis and applies the pragmatic method.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 49.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 118-119.

A piece of chalk has substance in the sense that you can pick it up, feel its powdery texture, see the whiteness and break it into several pieces. This is the pragmatic meaning of the substance of chalk.

In this way each notion is to be interpreted by tracing its respective practical consequences. For James, many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment one subjects them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There is no difference in abstract truth that does not express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact. "The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one."¹²

Pragmatism represents the empiricist attitude in philosophy. Yet it does not insist on any special results. The pragmatist supposedly turns away from abstraction, verbal solutions, fixed principles, closed systems and pretended absolutes. "He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up."¹³

Man must bring out of each word its practical cash-value and

¹²Ibid., p. 50.

¹³Ibid., p. 51.

set it to work within the stream of his experience. Theories become instruments, not static answers to problems in which one can rest secure. Pragmatism is predominantly anti-intellectualist. It agrees with nominalism in appealing to particulars. It emphasizes practical aspects with utilitarianism. It steps with positivism in its disdain for verbal solutions and metaphysical abstractions. Pragmatism is fully armed and militant against rationalism as a pretension and as a method.¹⁴

At this point of the inquiry James was quite logical. For many pages he had been insisting on the pragmatic method. "One must interpret each notion by tracing its practical consequences." But why must one do this? James saw quite clearly that the pragmatic method was valid only if a pragmatic theory of truth were argued to and established. It made no sense to trace practical consequences unless one already maintained that truth is that which has practical consequences. All men desire truth and consistency. Man's mind goes out after truth. Therefore, thought James, real truth must be pragmatic truth, since practical consequences are the vital determining element for a real philosophy.

Attention must now be centered on the pragmatic theory of truth which is the logical background for the pragmatic method and the second cardinal point in James's religious pragmatism.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 53-54.

CHAPTER III

JAMES'S THEORY OF TRUTH

James begins with the disarming statement that truth is the agreement of certain of man's ideas with reality.¹ But what is meant by agreement with reality? The popular notion is that a true idea must copy its reality. A man shuts his eyes and thinks of the clock on the opposite wall. He forms in his mind a true picture or "copy" of the clock's dial. It is evident, according to James, that the copy-theory of truth does not cover all the cases; it is too crude and limited.

The great assumption of the "intellectualists" is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. A man gets a true idea, fulfills his thinking destiny, and that is the end of the matter. According to the intellectualists man thus arrives at an epistemological state of stable equilibrium.²

Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its customary question. Grant an idea or belief to be true--what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's life? What human experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were

¹James, Pragmatism, p. 198.

²Ibid., p. 200.

false? What is the truth's cash-value in terms of experience? Answers to these questions will constitute James's position on truth: "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as."³

Thus truth for James is not a stagnant property inherent in the idea conceived. Truth is something that happens to an idea. The idea becomes true; is made true by subsequent events. The truth of an idea becomes a process of verification and validation. Man's ideas "agree" with reality in the sense that they have certain practical consequences which can be verified and validated in reality. This agreement is not an instantaneous act, but is an extended process of leading and guiding one idea into harmonious connection with other parts of man's experience.

The possession of true thoughts means the possession of invaluable instruments of action.⁴ One need not go too deeply into human life to realize the usefulness of having true beliefs about matters of fact. Truth can be and is eminently useful for man. Falsehood can be very harmful. It is a primary human duty to pursue true ideas--ideas which will connect with experience and

³Ibid., p. 201.

⁴Ibid., p. 202.

can be verified sometime in the future. Truth once possessed is not an end in itself, but is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions.

Analysis will now be made of a very homely example sketched by James. It will throw important light on the subjective element in the pragmatic theory of truth.

If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful. The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. . . . True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience. True ideas would never have been singled out as such, would never have acquired a class-name, least of all a name suggesting value, unless they had been useful from the outset in this way.⁵

In these simple words the true is connected with what is useful, and "the useful" becomes an integral part of what is true. But personal usefulness is evidently a subjective element and is not objectively the same for all men. The man in James's example finds it useful to follow the path because he thinks of the possible useful object at the end of the path. But another man might willingly wait at that particular spot, and find it useful to conserve his strength and see which way the cows go home. A third man, a criminal, might find it eminently useful to race away into the forest to avoid detection. James maintains that the true is

⁵Ibid., pp. 203-204.

the useful, and the useful is the true. Therefore each man's course of action, since it is individually useful, is true and valid. Truth becomes a matter of what each man finds useful in a particular situation. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that James's theory of truth is predominantly subjective.

Pragmatism always looks upon truth as something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment of man's experience leads on to another moment. It is always a leading process--working on to what is useful or worth-while to the individual person. "When a moment in our experience, of any kind whatever, inspires us with a thought that is true, that means that sooner or later we dip by that thought's guidance into the particulars of experience again and make advantageous connexion with them."⁶ Pragmatic truth ultimately connects man with what is advantageous and useful.

James poses the problem of whether every truth perceived by man must be directly and actually verified. Consider again the man looking at the clock on the opposite wall. Is it true that the clock is real and tells correct time? Actual verification, of course, would answer the question. One could walk over to the clock, touch it, open it and examine the inner workings. Then it would certainly be true. But human life would collapse into insanity if a person demanded actual direct verification for every

⁶Ibid., p. 205.

common-sense truth of daily life. James solves the problem by stating that truth lives on a sort of credit system of verification. Man sees the clock on the wall and lets his notion pass for true without attempting to verify it. He knows that the notion could be verified if the necessity of actual verification should arise. Truths mean verification-processes essentially, but indirect and possible verifications are also included. In the credit system of truth, man accepts many facts and truths without direct verification. Such truths are not actually verified, but they can be verified. "This all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth. But beliefs verified concretely by somebody are the posts of the whole superstructure."⁷

Description of the pragmatic theory of truth has been focused up to this point on matters of fact and ordinary external objects of daily life. Has pragmatism anything to say about purely mental ideas and relations between mental ideas? Very definitely.

Pragmatism maintains that true and false beliefs also obtain in the sphere of purely mental conceptions.⁸ One plus one makes two. White differs less from gray than it does from black. When

⁷Ibid., pp. 207-208.

⁸Ibid., p. 209.

the cause begins to act, the effect also begins. The mental objects here are absolute and unconditional. Call them definitions or principles--in any case they are perceptually obvious at a glance. No sense-verification is necessary for such principles. Once they are true, they are always true. Truth in this mental world is legitimately eternal.

Yet even in the realm of mental relations, truth is also an affair of leading. One abstract idea leads up to another, and extensive fruitful systems of logical and mathematical truth are formed. One logical conclusion brings on another and the new resultant is then applied back into the stream of sensible experience. Theory and fact join together and work correctly because the very structure of man's thinking works correctly and leads to a significant result.

Truth, it was said, means agreement with reality. What does the word "reality" include? This reality can be of three kinds, according to James. First, reality can mean the concrete facts of daily experience. Second, reality includes properly formed abstract ideas and the relations perceived intuitively between them. Third, reality means the whole mass of truths already in man's possession.⁹

What does the word "agreement" mean? James gives, as might be expected, a pragmatic interpretation of the word, "agreement."

⁹Ibid., p. 212.

It has already been stated that the copy-theory of truth does not work in all cases--how could the human mind "copy" such ideas as power, past time, beauty and spontaneity? A wider interpretation of agreement is needed. "To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed."¹⁰ Agreement, in other words, is nothing but the pragmatic leading and guiding. The essential thing about agreement is the process of being guided. An idea agrees with a reality when it fits practically or conceptually with the reality. An idea agrees with a reality when it helps man to deal successfully with the circumstances and situation connected with the reality. An idea agrees with a reality when it adapts man's whole life to the reality's setting and surrounding connections. To agree means ultimately to successfully follow out a process of practical verification: "Agreement thus turns out to be essentially an affair of leading--leading that is useful because it is into quarters that contain objects that are important. True ideas lead us into useful verbal and conceptual quarters as well as directly up to useful sensible termini. . . . In the end and eventually, all true processes must lead to the face of directly verifying sensible experiences somewhere, which somebody's ideas have

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 212-213.

copied."¹¹

Thus a pragmatist interprets agreement as any process of conduction from a present idea to a future terminus, provided only the process runs smoothly and prosperously. Pragmatism wants a theory which will work. Man's true idea must mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences. Common sense and previous belief must be disturbed as little as possible. The ultimate goal is always some sensible terminus or other that can be verified exactly. James sums up his description of truth with the statement that "truth in science is what gives us the maximum possible sum of satisfactions, taste included, but consistency both with previous truth and with novel fact is always the most imperious claimant. . . . Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc., are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them."¹² One can say that a man is healthy because he digests and sleeps well--or one can say that a man digests or sleeps well because he is healthy. In like manner one can say that something is true because it is practically useful--or it is practically useful because it is true. For James, both statements mean the same thing.

Briefly put, "the true" is the expedient in the way of man's

¹¹Ibid., p. 215

¹²Ibid., pp. 217-218.

thinking just as "the right" is the expedient in the way of man's behaving.¹³ That is true which is expedient in the long run and on the whole in view of whatever experience one has had up to the present moment. New experience may come along and force man into a new set of truths. There is no absolute and eternal truth in man's practical experience. Abstract principles are eternally true in the abstract, but they too have to be applied in the always changing stream of practical experience. The pragmatist must be ready for new experience which will very likely shift one's stock of present truths. One must live by the true today, but be ready to call it falsehood tomorrow. "Aristotelian logic and scholastic metaphysics were expedient for centuries, but human experience has spilled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. 'Absolutely' they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers."¹⁴

Thus pragmatism holds out for a potentially better truth which will occur in the future and will always work towards greater concreteness of fact. The truth man has today is adequate only for today and will be improved by the experience of tomorrow. Man works on towards the future goal of absolute truth while building

¹³Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 223.

on the wide stock of half-truths already in possession. Truth is not something set, definite and unchangeable. Rather it is fluid, half-formed and improving all the time. Certain truths are concluded from today's facts; but these truths have to dip back into the next day's experience and new fund of facts. Man's obligation to acknowledge truth is not unconditional. Concrete truths in the plural need be recognized only when their recognition is expedient. Truth is a duty only when it is related to the practical situation at hand. Truth grows in somewhat the same manner as a rolling snowball increases its size. Truth is pertinent when it is recognized as expedient for man in a particular situation.¹⁵

The connection between the pragmatic method and James's theory of truth is now evident. The pragmatic method insists that each notion is to be interpreted by tracing its practical consequences. But this tracing of practical consequences makes sense only if "that is true and meaningful which has useful practical consequences." In other words, the pragmatic method makes sense only when it is grounded in a well-established pragmatic theory of truth. The pragmatic method and the pragmatic theory of truth do, in fact, bolster and interpenetrate each other in what one could call James's pragmatic view of experience.

The will to believe and its related pragmatic elements must now be discussed.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 232.

CHAPTER IV

THE WILL TO BELIEVE

James's doctrine on the will to believe is the third cardinal point of reference in his religious pragmatism. The first two topics--the pragmatic method and theory of truth--have already been discussed. A sketch must now be attempted of the will to believe and its connections with the pragmatic theory of truth. The first part of this chapter will consist in a description of the doctrine of the will to believe. Then certain connections between the pragmatic theory of truth and the will to believe will be discussed.

What, then, is the document called "The Will to Believe"? It is "an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced."¹ It is James's discussion of the scope and validity of the voluntary religious faith of man. The original address, "The Will to Believe," was delivered at the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities in 1896. The book, The Will to Believe,

¹William James, The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York, 1897), pp. 1-2.

was published in 1897 and contained, of course, the thirty-one page essay, "The Will to Believe," as well as important related essays which had appeared earlier. These were "Is Life Worth Living" (1895); "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1880); "Reflex Action and Theism" (1881); "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884); and "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891). The earlier essays, especially "Is Life Worth Living," lead up to and aid in the understanding of James's later doctrine of the will to believe.

James begins his defense of voluntarily adopted faith with explanations of the terms involved. The terms "hypothesis" and "option" are to be carefully described, since they play such an important part in the thesis of the will to believe. An hypothesis is anything that can be proposed to man's belief. A live hypothesis is one that appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. Deadness and liveness in hypotheses are not insignificant instruments to be thought of as intrinsic qualities. They are crucial relations to the individual thinker. Deadness and liveness are to be measured by the person's willingness to act. If a proposition is greatly alive for an individual, then that individual is willing to put himself out--to act irrevocably. In addition, if a person is ready to take positive action in accordance with the proposition, then it practically means real belief in the proposition.²

²Ibid., p. 3

What is an option? An option is the decision to be made between two hypotheses. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones. "If I say to you: 'Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan,' it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: 'Be an agnostic or be a Christian,' it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief."³

A forced option is one that is not avoidable. That is, one is faced with a dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction with no possibility of not choosing. An example would be: "Either accept this truth or go without it."

A momentous option is one that involves a unique opportunity, a significant personal stake and an irreversible decision. It is in no way trivial.

It is important to realize what James means by a genuine option, since only a completely genuine option is to be resolved by the will to believe. The notion includes three definitions already given. A genuine option is one that is living, forced, and momentous. In other words, a genuine option involves two live hypotheses, cannot be avoided, and is a question of a significant personal stake in a unique situation.

As an introduction to the actual thesis of the will to believe, James proceeds to an analysis of the actual psychology of

³Ibid.

human opinion and conviction.⁴ Does the intellect always operate according to the pure light of logical evidence with very little help from the passional and volitional nature? Or do man's passional and volitional convictions lie at the root of most of his convictions?

Consider the first possibility--that the intellect operates pretty much alone. Certain facts seem to give foundation for this statement. For example, a man reads a reliable historical account of the life and career of Abraham Lincoln. The intellect perceives the evidence and accepts the essential facts about the existence of Lincoln. It would seem in this case that the mind has no need of man's passional or volitional nature to attain to a conviction. Lincoln was objectively there whether the man reading the history wishes to believe it or not.

Consider a man with ten dollars in his pocket. His mind knows that ten dollars are there and no more. Again, it is evident that no amount of mere volition will make the ten dollars a hundred dollars. Man's objective opinion here is that there are ten dollars in the pocket. This opinion is not modifiable at will. The will neither helps nor hinders the intellect in its grasp of this evidence. In this case, too, it would seem that the intellect grasps the objective evidence with little help from the will.

Certain writers bring forward Pascal's wager as an acceptable case of the will's impulse overriding the intellect. But James

⁴Ibid., pp. 4-11.

urges caution here. Not all that Pascal says is looked upon favorably by James. Yet it must be said that certain elements in Pascal's wager are not too far removed from James's own doctrine of the will to believe. Pascal's wager is presented in the language of a gaming-table:

You must either believe or not believe that God is--which will you do? Your human reason cannot say. A game is going on between you and the nature of things which at the day of judgment will bring out either heads or tails. Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you should stake all you have on heads, or God's existence; if you win in such a case, you gain eternal beatitude; if you lose, you lose nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God; for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, and finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain. Go then, and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples,--Cela vous fera croire et vous abetira.⁵

James correctly remarks that the frank terms of Pascal's wager constitute a rather extreme position and are not Pascal's only arguments in favor of the Christian religion. But if Pascal's wager is accepted, it is an example of man's will strongly influencing a certain conviction where the reason cannot arrive at a definite logical conclusion. Few men would be moved to act by the sheer will-power of Pascal's wager. For most men the hypothesis offered by Pascal is not a live one. "It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal cannot be said to be a

⁵Ibid., pp. 5-6.

living option."⁶

From one point of view, then, it seems silly and vile to believe by the effort of volition alone. The whole history and tenor of the scientific method seem to add weight to the conclusion that objective evidence is all that counts. At first glance, it would seem that man's mind must submit to the facts independently of the will's impulse.

Yet man's non-intellectual nature does influence his convictions according to James. In typical fashion, James has given a moving and partially convincing description of a widely-held opinion, and then proceeded to disagree with it. Man's mind must have evidence--"yet if any one should thereupon assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preference have taken wing, or that pure reason is what then settles our opinions, he would fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts."⁷

It is quite true that man's willing nature cannot resurrect and give existence to certain hypotheses. It cannot resurrect them because they are already dead. And they are already dead because the willing nature has already acted directly against them. Live hypotheses, on the other hand, can be accepted and strengthened by man's willing nature.

⁶Ibid., p. 6.

⁷Ibid., p. 8.

What is meant by man's willing nature in this context? The term, as usual with James, is rather vague and far-reaching. It includes direct acts of the will as well as emotional and environmental factors, fear, hope, prejudice and passion. Even social pressure and imitation have a legitimate place here. In fact, willing nature seems to mean all the forceful non-intellectual pressures and motives brought to bear upon a man as he faces a particular choice.

The exposition of the terms and context of James's doctrine of the will to believe is now complete. James's central thesis can now be set down. "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision,--just like deciding yes or no,--and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth."⁸ The statement is now clear. Man's passional nature must decide an option between propositions when two important conditions are verified. First, it must be a question of a genuine option--that is, one that is living, forced and momentous. Second, the option cannot be decided on intellectual grounds. If a man refuses to decide the option in these circumstances, says James, he is no better off than the man who goes ahead with a

⁸Ibid., p. 11.

choice. The decision not to choose proceeds also from man's non-intellectual nature and involves the risk of loss of truth.

The doctrine of the will to believe does not pretend to answer systematic skepticism. The reasonable mind works on the postulate that there is truth and that it is the destiny of man to attain it. If a man chooses to believe in no truths at all because he fancies that there are none, then the will to believe has no place in his thought life.

The will to believe is a valid empirical approach in man's pursuit of true beliefs. In the history of philosophy there have been two approaches to true beliefs, according to James. There is the empiricist way of believing in truth and there is the absolutist way.⁹ James, of course, prefers the empiricist approach to truth while he classifies scholastic philosophy as one of the absolutist systems.

The absolutists say that man not only can attain to a knowledge of the truth, but he can know when he has attained it. The empiricists would maintain that although man can attain to truth, he cannot infallibly know when he has it. The empiricist tendency has largely prevailed in science, while the absolutist tendency has had its way in philosophy. Each rationalist philosopher thinks that his own system is the eternal closed system. Each rationalist philosopher thinks that he has the ultimate certitude--while other thinkers have only partial truth. Scholastic orthodoxy has beau-

⁹Ibid., pp. 12-17

tifully and clearly evolved the doctrine about objective evidence, and as a matter of fact, each thinker in the diverse philosophical systems thinks that he has attained the necessary "objective evidence." Yet it is an extremely difficult task, in an absolutist system, to actually attain to the eagerly desired certitude and objective evidence. The thoughts and concepts of the absolutist, while beautiful in the abstract, fail to touch the practical level of human experience.

Complete empiricism is the mental background for the will to believe. Empiricism is, for James, the only sensible philosophical path to true beliefs. "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes."¹⁰ Man must always go on experiencing and thinking over his experience. In this way his opinions can become more and more true. Most of the opinions of man can and will be reinterpreted and corrected in the course of experience. Truth grows as man's experience grows. "There is but one indefectibly certain truth, and that is the truth that pyrrhonistic scepticism itself leaves standing,--the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists."¹¹ All other truths are not final and closed. They must

¹⁰Ibid., p. 14

¹¹Ibid., pp. 14-15.

be reinterpreted and corrected in the future.

At this point it is possible to see the connection between the will to believe and the pragmatic theory of truth. When a person possesses sufficient empirical data and can properly evaluate the practical consequences, the pragmatic theory of truth is to be applied. When the available evidence is non-empirical or incomplete, the will to believe is in order. The will to believe helps towards a solution of a genuine option when the intellectual grounds for a decision are not adequate. But the pragmatic theory of truth maintains that truth is not yet complete or fully verified. In certain types of problems, absolute certitude and compelling objective evidence are not yet there. The full intellectual and empirical background for a decision is not yet prepared. Frequently, then, man comes face to face with a genuine option without the necessary intellectual background for a decision. Go right ahead, says James. Make the decision. Let the strong impulses of your non-intellectual nature carry you along. Whether your decision is right or wrong will gradually become clear in the course of future experience. The will to believe must first make the choice which the pragmatic theory of truth will then fully and finally verify. No infallible signal sounds to proclaim to man that now at last he has the full possession of a true belief. He makes his decision, forms his mind for the time being, and then looks towards the correcting thoughts and experience of the future. The will to believe is thus eminently empirical and

pragmatic in that it looks to the outcome and total future drift of man's thinking to see if a certain position be valid and true. In other words, the will to believe and the pragmatic theory of truth work together. At first a direct solution of a particular problem is attempted by means of the pragmatic theory of truth. If empirical data and practical consequences are insufficient or lacking, recourse can be had to the will to believe. Selections and options of the will to believe must, in turn, be ultimately tested and purified by the pragmatic drift of man's future experience.

The valid use of the will to believe does not mean that man's non-intellectual nature is to run wild. It does not mean that man is not to be eminently intellectual and rational in the ordinary business of life. The will to believe is validly used only in the face of a genuine option--one that is living, forced and momentous. Rather often the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous. In such a case one can wait. On less important choices man can wait for objective evidence and refuse to make up his mind until it has come. Such is the usual procedure in most scientific questions and in the ordinary human affairs of each day. In trivial matters, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all.¹²

¹²Ibid., p. 20.

But when it is a question of truth concerning objective nature one cannot decide promptly just to get the matter out of the way. The proper understanding of objective nature and the problems of science is not trivial but philosophically momentous. Yet this does not mean that we are to use the will to believe for the solution of every scientific experiment. An option in the realm of science may well be momentous, but even here it is seldom a question of living hypotheses and a forced decision. In most scientific experiments the mind must maintain an attitude of skeptical balance. The objective evidence is to be carefully sifted and thought over. Most of the options in the realm of science are not forced and can wait for further testing and validation. "Let us agree that wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal."¹³

The great questions of life, of course, are speculative, not scientific. Inquiry must now be made into some of the momentous speculative problems of life in an effort to see possible and even unavoidable applications of the will to believe. If living, forced and momentous options are found among these speculative problems, and if the intellectual evidence is not sufficient, then the will to believe has an important role to play in this crucial field.

Moral questions, of course, are high up on the list of the

¹³Ibid., pp. 21-22.

crucial speculative problems of life. The deeply perplexing decisions faced in the moral field are momentous, living and, in many cases, forced. They fall under the will to believe. The intellectual evidence is not always there, yet one cannot wait around collecting evidence and postponing moral decisions indefinitely. Therefore the will and heart of man, not the strict rationalist attitude, are to settle crucial moral questions. "A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart."¹⁴ It is man's will and total passionate nature which decide whether moral beliefs at all are to be accepted. "If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one."¹⁵

Another momentous speculative problem is the problem of man's religious belief. James works his way into this topic by pointing out that belief in a fact will sometimes help create that fact. In the ordinary personal relationships of daily life a man sees that his faith in a certain fact helps to bring that fact into existence. The man who really wants to succeed in a particular venture, who firmly believes that he can succeed, has already

¹⁴Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 23.

taken a significant step down the road to success. His faith, confidence and expectation have helped him overcome the fundamental human inertia to be faced in a difficult situation. Man's desire for a certain kind of truth actually helps to bring about the existence of that truth. In a certain sense, faith in a certain fact or outcome can produce or partially determine that fact or outcome.

James has cautiously led up to the principle that "faith in a fact can help create the fact." This is true, says James, in certain practical situations of life. But can this idea be used in the religious field? Does faith in a fact help to create the fact in a matter of religious belief? And does the related doctrine of the will to believe have a valid function in establishing man's religious belief?

James's answer to both questions is in the positive. The very purpose of the essay, "The Will to Believe," is a justification of man's religious belief--a belief which cannot be intellectually proved according to James. But what is the "religious belief" which James repeatedly mentions in this essay of 1897? The religious belief of this essay is very vague, and differs somewhat from the more extensive doctrine to follow in The Varieties of Religious Experience in 1902. The succeeding chapter of the present thesis will delineate some of James's rambling notions of religious belief to be found in the Varieties. In 1897, however, James tells us that "religion says essentially two things. First she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the

overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. . . . The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true."¹⁶

Should a man accept this affirmation of religion? Is the religious hypothesis valid? Apply the will to believe, says James. First, is the religious hypothesis a living option for you? If not, proceed no further. If religion is a totally dead option for you, then neither intellectual evidence nor the will to believe will resurrect your beliefs. You are a moral skeptic and must go your own way.

If, on the other hand, the religious hypothesis is a live option, then you go on to the next question. Is man's acceptance of religious belief momentous or trivial for him? Obviously it is a question of a momentous option with a significant, even an eternal personal stake in the matter.

Is the option forced? Is the decision unavoidable? Or can one wait and hope for more light and evidence? James maintains that the option in the face of the religious hypothesis is forced.¹⁷ Man must choose one way or the other. Man cannot reasonably refuse to choose. The presumption is that not too much additional convincing evidence will be brought to light in the

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 25-26.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 26.

future. Man gains nothing by waiting. To hold off a decision in this question of religion is to choose skepticism. The skeptic who insists on waiting does not really avoid an option. He has taken the positive position that it is better to risk loss of eternal truth than stake a chance on temporary error. Since the intellectual evidence will never be complete, the man who does not accept the religious hypothesis is definitely against it. There is no middle ground here. Man's trustful acceptance of the religious hypothesis with his willing and passionate nature is a process that does the deepest service to the universe. This use of the will to believe is not blind or unreasonable. It is simply the use of the instincts and courageous drives of the heart in a case where the intellect is inadequate. Man is not to jump ahead and believe the patent superstitions offered by many self-appointed religious teachers who come along. A patent superstition is obviously a dead hypothesis and cannot fall under the will to believe. The freedom to believe covers only living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve.¹⁸

Thus man must use the will to believe to attain to true beliefs in the field of religion. The belief that religion is true is of crucial importance since belief is measured by action. Belief in a life of religion will help to create a life of religion. The man who accepts the fundamental religious hypothesis will act

¹⁸Ibid., p. 29.

differently from the man who founds his life on naturalistic belief alone. The absolutist says: Wait and use the intellect to form a perfectly rational choice in the light of the objective evidence which will surely come. The empiricist, with both feet on the ground, says: Choose now. The intellectual evidence will never be complete. Let your heart, instincts and courage help you in this crucial decision. You can lose nothing. You can gain all. Whether you are right or not will become clear in the course of experience.

This acceptance of religious faith is the one thing that can destroy pessimism. The pessimist trembles at the brink of life and wonders whether life is worth living. In fact, the whole human life-situation is like a man who, while mountain-climbing, has attained a precarious position and can escape only by means of a terrible leap.¹⁹ The pessimist in this life-situation falters, does not project a strong faith in the religious hypothesis and, as a result, is lost. The optimist realizes the risks involved, projects a strong faith and takes a courageous leap--knowing that his very confidence is a partial cause of success. In short, man is to believe that life is worth living, and this very belief will help create the fact.

Here again the will to believe and the pragmatic theory of truth work hand in hand. Man's personal belief that life is worth

¹⁹Ibid., p. 59.

living has the practical psychological consequence that life actually becomes worth living for this person. Since such belief has this practical consequence, it is true and pragmatically valid.

Attention must now be focused on certain pragmatic elements in James's extensive religious treatise, The Varieties of Religious Experience.

CHAPTER V

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The three leading ideas of James's religious pragmatism have already been sketched. They are the pragmatic method itself, the pragmatic theory of truth and the will to believe.

An attempt will now be made to show how these leading ideas manifested themselves in, and influenced the Varieties. The main problem is a problem of length. The Varieties is a long treatise--consisting in the Gifford lectures on natural religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902. Twenty lectures and a postscript are included in the book. James's analysis of religious thinkers and various religious experiences ranges far and wide and is not always free from prejudice. Careful selection of certain concepts and examples must be made. The prime objective is to get a clear understanding of the spirit and letter of James's teaching in the Varieties and to grasp the strong pragmatic undercurrent in much of the argumentation. Procedure in this chapter will be as follows: first, a major religious concept, practice or example used by James will be accurately stated. Then, if additional treatment is required, certain pragmatic elements will be pointed out and explained. The purpose of this chapter is really the purpose of

the entire thesis: to see the influence of pragmatism in the religious thought of William James.

The Varieties is, for the most part, a psychological description of man's religious constitution. James originally planned ten descriptive lectures on "Man's Religious Appetites" to be followed by ten metaphysical lectures on "Their Satisfaction through Philosophy." But James obviously became absorbed in the psychological descriptions and explanations of man's personal experience of religion and let this occupy him through most of the twenty lectures. This does not stop him, however, from giving philosophical analyses and conclusions from time to time.

The vague concept of religion presented in the Will to Believe has already been pointed out. In the second lecture of the Varieties James tells us that religion consists in "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."¹ The vague concept of the Will to Believe has become somewhat particularized. By the time James works his way through to the twentieth lecture of the Varieties, he is ready to draw the conclusion that religion includes three particular beliefs and two psychological attitudes or characteristics. This complex conclusion is vitally important. It comes towards the end of the Varieties, but is the mental background and,

¹James, Varieties, p. 31.

supposedly, the net result of all of James's religious analysis. It throws much needed light on the whole previous treatise.

Religion, then, includes three beliefs. First, the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance. Second, union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is man's true end. Third, prayer or inner communion with the spirit of the higher universe--be that spirit "God" or "law"--is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world. In addition to these three beliefs, religion also includes two psychological characteristics. First, there is a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism. Second, there is a personal conviction of salvation and peace joined to feelings of love towards other men.²

Already one can sense the pragmatic and empirical overtones. "Prayer is a process wherein work is really done. Spiritual energy flows in and produces effects." Man feels a new zest and lives his life with peace and safety. This attitude is almost identical with that of the man who courageously uses the will to believe. The one using the will to believe believes that he will not fail and is able to pour himself out in energy and positive

²Ibid., pp. 485-486.

activity. Such energy and activity help the man along the road to success and builds the conviction that life is actually worth living. A man's life becomes peaceful and meaningful because he has embraced religious belief. Thus religious belief tends to verify itself by the peaceful harmony and dynamic conviction which follow.

A remark by James in the first part of the opening lecture is quite significant and has sometimes been forgotten by later critics. "I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed."³ The approach to religion in the Varieties is largely psychological. James's best work here is psychological. He gives the impression of honestly trying to find out the actual psychological state of the person under discussion. But his ever inquiring and interested mind could not always stop here. From time to time he dips back into the causes of the person's psychological state and attempts to sketch the philosophical foundation which must be at the root. He thought very highly of the pragmatic theory of truth and presupposed it or flashed back to it frequently as the only reasonable mental background for any problem. It is not that he wished to directly connect pragmatism and religious consciousness for the length of twenty lectures. Rather he delineated the care-

³Ibid., p. 2.

fully selected evidence he could find for man's religious experience and when the time came to attempt a philosophical analysis, pragmatism seemed the only theory that could explain the facts. In other words, James was expressly and directly a psychologist; but he could not help being, at least implicitly and indirectly, a confirmed pragmatist.

James is also an empiricist in his religious treatise. The procedure is not to argue from set principles and evolve a closed system which will stand forever. Many documents and extensive evidence are to be sifted and evaluated. James attempts to analyze and grasp the mind of the people who, supposedly, are most accomplished in the religious life and best able to give an intelligible account of their psychological state and motivation. He is not interested in the ordinary religious believer whose religion is largely a matter of imitation and social habit. He hopes to analyze persons who have pursued religion exclusively--who have set the pattern and had the original experiences in a certain field of religion. It is true that the exclusive pursuit of the religious life does tend to the exceptional and eccentric. But this is due, no doubt, to an exalted emotional sensibility joined with various types of deeply felt inner conflicts. The method is always empirical. Gather facts. Sift through examples. See what conclusions can be drawn from the many test-cases.

A common phenomenon in spiritual history is the conflict between what is immediately good and what is finally good. It is

evident that man regards some states of mind as superior to others. The superiority does not derive from some antecedent organic condition such as the liver's fine condition or the relaxed state of the nervous system. Man looks upon certain states of mind as superior "either because we take an immediate delight in them; or else it is because we believe them to bring us good consequential fruits for life."⁴ One criterion of mental states--immediate delight or inner happiness with an idea--is manifested to the individual as something good. The other criterion--serviceability for man's needs and consistency with other opinions--leads to what is true. Yet these two criteria are frequently in conflict. What is immediately delightful to the individual may appear good here and now, but will not be good in the long run because it is not true. Drunkenness may be immediately delightful; but it is not a true and meaningful state of mind because it does not bring permanently good fruits for life. This is the eternal conflict between what appears immediately good and what is true and good in the total course of experience. This conflict leads up to much confusion and uncertainty in man's spiritual judgments. What is good in the present situation is not always what is good in the long run.

Many great theological thinkers have had to face this conflict and struggle against their own neurotic temperament at the same

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

time. But their thinking is not to be condemned merely because of the neurotic temperament. The only real criteria of theological thinking are immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness.⁵ All theology must submit to these tests. It does not matter whether you are talking about Saint Paul, George Fox or Saint Teresa. Their theology stands or falls according to the above-mentioned norms. More important, the above-mentioned norms fade back into the pragmatic norm itself. A thing or idea is luminous, reasonable and morally helpful when it leads on to practical consequences. Thus the final test of any belief is not its origin, but the way in which it works on the whole. "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."⁶ Hence, it is not enough that a religious experience have, or claim to have, an origin in supernatural revelation, personal intuition, pontifical authority or direct spiritual communication. A religious experience is true and valid if it has good practical results. James includes an interesting quotation from Saint Teresa's Autobiography which allegedly maintains the identical position. A vision or apparent heavenly favor is true if it is followed by good dispositions in the recipient. "A genuine heavenly vision yields to the soul a harvest of ineffable spiritual riches, and an admirable renewal of bodily strength. I alleged these reasons to

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

⁶Ibid., p. 20.

those who so often accused my visions of being the work of the enemy of mankind and the sport of my imagination. . . . I showed them the jewels which the divine hand had left with me:--they were my actual dispositions."⁷

James is primarily interested in personal, not institutional religion. Personal religion centers interest on the inner dispositions of man himself with his conscience, his helplessness and his incompleteness. Institutional religion supposedly stresses worship and sacrifice, theology, ceremony and ecclesiastical organization. For James, worship and sacrifice are nothing but procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity and are less worthy of attention. Institutional religion is primarily an art, "the art of winning the favor of the gods."⁸ Personal religion goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and the divine.

Religion is simply the feelings, acts and experiences of man in relation to the divine. But what is the "divine"? The divine is any object that is godlike whether it be a concrete deity or not. In personal religion, the divine is the primal reality to which the individual feels impelled to respond in a solemn and grave manner. The divine, in other words, is definitely related to man's emotional experiences of solemnity. Since it is related

⁷Saint Teresa, Autobiography, as quoted by James in The Varieties, p. 21.

⁸James, Varieties, p. 29.

to something emotional in man, the divine can never be clear-cut and sharply drawn. It can be present in a greater or less degree.

The pragmatic connotations of James's description of the divine are evident. The divine is that which prompts solemn reactions in the individual. Always the real meaning of any word is to be grasped by an analysis of the particular consequences. Thus the word "divine" means pragmatically that which is capable of producing a personal reaction of emotional solemnity. The emotional solemnity leads on to a kind of deep religious happiness which is not just a buoyant feeling of escape. Deep religious happiness faces the fact that there is in the world an evil, negative and tragic principle working against man.⁹ This evil principle is the negative side of religious life against which many of the outstanding religious thinkers have struggled. A man remains solemn in the face of the struggle; but fundamentally happy because he knows that a courageous struggle will lead on to victory. All human life has its sacrifice and surrender whether voluntary or otherwise. A life of religion embraces these sacrifices graciously and even makes them a positive ingredient of permanent happiness. "Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary; and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute. It becomes an essential

⁹Ibid., p. 50.

organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill."¹⁰

James's explanation of religious conversion will lead us directly to the pragmatic theory of truth. Conversion in general is the process, gradual or sudden, by which "a self hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities."¹¹ Conversion is an inner alteration of personality from one way of life to another. It is not just a temporary change of viewpoint. It is a total transformation of the person's life-aim in such a way that previous aims or tendencies are definitively expelled. Most men have an habitual center of personal energy--a focal point of the actual aims and conscious ideas which motivate life for the time being. A person devotes himself to, and works from the group of key ideas which form the central motivating force in his conscious life. When religious conversion occurs, the person changes the habitual center of his personal energy. At one moment the conscious guiding ideas are pursuit of pleasure and advancement of the self while religious considerations remain peripheral. At another moment, after conversion, the conscious guiding ideas are religious while other less worthy motives become peripheral. The

¹⁰Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹Ibid., p. 189.

conscious center of character and personality has changed to a new level. In the mental life of man there are many levels and depths of conscious and subconscious forces of character. In religious conversion the latent religious aims and ideas rise to the conscious surface and become dominant characteristics of the personality. The less worthy considerations which had been dominant sink back to the depths--never, perhaps, to return. Conversion is thus an evident shift in the central motivating forces of consciousness. "To say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy."¹²

Why does man's center of personal energy shift? Why do the new religious motives become dominant? The explanation is twofold. First, there are the explicitly conscious processes of thought and will which lead up to the point of conversion. This is the conscious preparation for conversion and, in the long run, is of secondary importance. Second, there are the subconscious or subliminal incubation and maturing of motives which are deposited by the experiences of life. The important word here is subliminal. The religious motives and ideas are not all consciously perceived, but having once entered, they do their work silently and beyond the field of actual consciousness. After a sufficient process of

¹²Ibid., p. 196.

incubation, the maturing religious motives burst forth into the field of actual consciousness and greatly affect the religious conversion. Some writers, according to James, call this process a miracle or a manifest outpouring of divine grace. More often than not, it is simply the motives of the subliminal field of consciousness intruding upon and overcoming the person's emotional center of energy.

A religious conversion is to be judged by the fruits following upon the conversion. The significance and value of a human event or condition must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. Conversion, no matter how sudden, is a human condition and must be judged on empirical grounds. "If the fruits for life of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it."¹³ In many cases of sudden conversion the fruits for life are not really permanent. This is due to the fact that sudden converts usually have an exaggerated emotional sensibility, a tendency to automatisms and a very active and highly developed subliminal self. Such characteristics are not ordinarily consistent with a permanent change in the habits of life. The exaggerated emotional sensibility and nervous instability aid the process of conversion but do not help to stabilize the

¹³Ibid., p. 237.

practical life-habits which follow.

A true and lasting conversion has, as its permanent fruit, the characteristic called saintliness. Real saintliness is the practical fruit and only valid criterion of a genuine religious conversion. The saintly character is the one for which spiritual emotions are the habitual center of the personal energy. The distinguishing characteristics of saintliness are the same for all religions.¹⁴ Saintliness includes four inner conditions of soul and is followed up by four practical consequences.

What are the four inner conditions of saintliness? The first condition is the intellectual and sensible conviction of the existence of an Ideal Power. This conviction includes the feeling of transcending the small selfish interests of the world and living in a wider and more worthy life. The Christians personify the Ideal Power and call it God; however, moral ideals, civic utopias and inner religious visions can serve as the Ideal Power. The second inner condition of saintliness is "a sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control."¹⁵ The third inner condition is a deeply felt elation and freedom which is the result of the lessening of selfish personal interests. The fourth condition is the shifting of the emotional center away from the selfish ego

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 271-274.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 273.

and towards loving and harmonious feelings with regard to others.

These four inner conditions of saintliness have the following four practical consequences: asceticism, strength of soul, purity and charity. Asceticism is closely linked with the passion for self-surrender and sometimes goes so far as total self-immolation. Asceticism leads the saint on to a positive pleasure in sacrifice as an expression of loyalty to the Ideal Power. Strength of soul is linked with the feeling of enlargement of life. The soul attains a new level of patience and fortitude while the ordinary personal motives and anxieties fade away. The soul is strong and fearless in the face of the always pressing difficulties of life. Purity is connected both with asceticism and with one's feeling of closer union with the Ideal Power. The soul becomes sensitive to spiritual discords. Brutal and sensual elements appear vulgar and repulsive. Weakness of the flesh is beaten into submission. Charity is the concrete working out of the shift of the emotional center away from the self. Tenderness for others is fostered. The eyes are closed to all motives of hate and distrust. Every beggar is the saint's brother.

Ultimately, then, saintliness is to be judged according to these practical consequences: asceticism, strength of soul, purity and charity. These qualities are to work together in proper proportion. In genuine saintliness no single quality is overemphasized to the detriment of the others. These four practical consequences, in harmonious proportion, are the criteria of a true

and meaningful saintliness.

Saint Aloysius Gonzaga is, for James, an example of an excessive passion for purity. "I will let the case of Saint Louis of Gonzaga serve as a type of excess in purification. I think you will agree that this youth carried the elimination of the external and discordant to a point which we cannot unreservedly admire."¹⁶ From a few citations taken from Meschler's beautiful biography of Saint Aloysius, James attempts to argue that the saintliness of Aloysius had no practical fruits or consequences. A long direct quotation from Meschler is taken from the chapter, "The Cradle of Holiness" which supposedly covers the career of Saint Aloysius around the age of ten.¹⁷ This chapter is only the fourth chapter of forty-four chapters in the book, yet a quotation from it is chosen by James to prove that the saintliness of Saint Aloysius was definitely unbalanced. In this quotation a picture is sketched of a ten-year-old boy who took a vow of chastity, avoided the companionship of women, kept his eyes cast down and regularly practised unusual austerities. James carefully selects further brief quotations to reinforce the supposed picture of a neurotic child not interested at all in social righteousness. Aloysius was, supposedly, all tied up in his own little self and did nothing to

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 350.

¹⁷ Maurice Meschler, S.J., Life of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga: Patron of Christian Youth, trans. by a Benedictine of the Perpetual Adoration (London, 1911), pp. 34-35.

help others around him. "When the intellect, as in this Louis, is originally no larger than a pin's head, and cherishes ideas of God of corresponding smallness, the result, notwithstanding the heroism put forth, is on the whole repulsive. Purity, we see in the object-lesson, is not the one thing needful; and it is better that a life should contract many a dirt-mark, than forfeit usefulness in its efforts to remain unspotted."¹⁸ James's principles here are clear, even though the total argumentation does not follow from the case of Saint Aloysius. The example chosen is unfortunate and does not fit at all. The pragmatist principle is that one judges a life by looking to the practical consequences or fruits manifest in that life. It is strange that James, with his empirical temper and passion for facts, did not take the trouble to glance through to the end of Meschler's biography. There he would have found out that Saint Aloysius did not die at the age of twenty-nine, as James seems to think. His "unsocial" and "useless" Aloysius died in 1591 at the age of twenty-three after personally caring for victims of the plague in two Roman hospitals.¹⁹ James's handling of Saint Aloysius is distorted, but is not to be ascribed to anti-Jesuit prejudice. "Other early Jesuits, especially the missionaries among them, the Xaviers, Brebeufs, Jogues, were objective minds, and fought in their way for the world's welfare; so their lives today

¹⁸James, Varieties, p. 354.

¹⁹Meschler, S.J., Life of Saint Aloysius, pp. 238-256.

inspire us."²⁰

James's principle always remains the same. Religion and saintliness are to be tested by a human judgment concerning the practical consequences to follow. "The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another. What I then propose to do is, briefly stated, to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity."²¹ It is a case of the "survival of the fittest" applied to religious beliefs. If religious beliefs work well in the face of human needs and experiences, they are to be accepted. If a religious belief does not work well, does not fit the current human needs, then it must be rejected.

James repeatedly maintains that one of the prime factors in religion is the conviction or feeling that some sort of Ideal Power or God exists. Man has an emotional sense which points to the existence of some sort of enveloping divine being. But is this emotional sense objectively and philosophically true? Can the truths of religion be completely and convincingly proven by human reason alone? Which is more important for the religious life of man--feeling or strict philosophical proof?

²⁰James, Varieties, p. 354.

²¹Ibid., p. 331.

Feeling is the deeper source of religion for James. Philosophical and theological formulas are not completely useless, but must be classes as secondary products in the field of religion. Feeling and unreflective sentiment are the primary and important factors in religion. "In a world in which no religious feeling had ever existed, I doubt whether any philosophic theology could ever have been framed. I doubt if dispassionate intellectual contemplation of the universe, apart from inner unhappiness and need of deliverance on the one hand and mystical emotion on the other, would ever have resulted in religious philosophies such as we now possess."²² Theological speculations are mere "overbeliefs and buildings-out" of the intellect into a field already delineated by strong religious feelings. There can be religion without theological speculation. But there can be no religion without religious feeling. Religious feeling is something dumb, personal and mysterious. Philosophy, on the other hand, attempts to be clear-cut, brutally objective and eternally unchangeable. It is always simple, noble, clean and rigorously logical. James makes light of what he calls "intellectualism" in religion. Religious intellectualism tries to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reason by itself. It uses non-subjective facts and general principles in an a priori fashion. The intellectualist despises individual feeling in the field of religion. Yet real

²²Ibid., p. 431.

individuality is founded in feeling. The really significant facts of human character are not found in the world of the generalizing intellect. One must look to the deeper recesses of feeling and to the darker, half-hidden strata of human consciousness.

How does James supposedly discredit the intellectualist approach to religion? As usual, he makes use of a pragmatic criterion.²³ The claims of natural theology must be tested by the actual subsequent experience of men in history. A genuine theology based on pure reason must convince men universally. It claims to be objectively convincing. Therefore one need only investigate whether the logical reason's approach to religion has actually been objectively convincing to the majority of men. Philosophy assures us that its conclusions are unchangeable and will free us from personal caprice and waywardness. Yet it is philosophy which forms sects and schools, and perpetuates differences between thinking men. The philosophical approach to God has simply not been universally convincing. James's main conclusion is that the logical reason helps to bring on religious conviction only if the person already wishes to believe. "I believe, in fact, that the logical reason of man operates in this field of divinity exactly as it has always operated in love, or in patriotism, or in politics, or in any other of the wider affairs of life, in which our passions or our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand.

²³Ibid., p. 436.

It finds arguments for our conviction, for indeed it has to find them."²⁴ Intellectual arguments for religion are cogent only for the person who is already favorably disposed towards, and emotionally inclined to religion. The person who already believes in God, finds that intellectual arguments confirm his conviction. Intellectual arguments are not sufficient for the person who does not wish to believe.

At this point the connection between the will to believe and James's analysis of religious experience is again evident. Man cannot rationally and logically prove the hypotheses of religion. Yet the hypotheses of religion cannot be ignored. They are too momentous to be neglected. God's existence, while impossible to demonstrate intellectually, can be handled properly by the will to believe. Man must decide whether his life will be influenced by a possibly existing divine being. The option for or against God is certainly forced, live and momentous. Yet the intellectual evidence is insufficient. This does not matter, says James, because personal feeling and emotional inclination are the primary factors of religious experience. Intellectual proofs and formulations are secondary. The will to believe with its use of man's passional nature will make up for the lack of intellectual evidence in the face of the religious hypothesis.

But is there a lack of intellectual evidence for religion?

²⁴Ibid.

How does James attempt to show that one cannot prove the existence of God? He briefly mentions the arguments from causality, design, ex consensu gentium, and the argument from the moral law which "presupposes a lawgiver." By way of disproof James modestly asserts that "I will not discuss these arguments technically. The bare fact that all idealists since Kant have felt entitled either to scout or to neglect them shows that they are not solid enough to serve as religion's all-sufficient foundation. Absolutely impersonal reasons would be in duty bound to show more general convincingness."²⁵ James is willing to follow the "idealists" when they call into question the existence of God. He seems to forget that in many other sections of his writings he criticizes the idealists for being abstract, overly rational and "out of touch with concrete reality." One is almost tempted to suppose that James is a victim of his own theory of belief. James definitely wanted to believe that the existence of God could not be intellectually demonstrated, so he cast about for a clever argument which would bolster his anti-intellectualist conviction. His refutation of causality in religion is probably the shortest in the history of philosophy: "Causation is indeed too obscure a principle to bear the weight of the whole structure of theology."²⁶

The argument from design is supposedly demolished by Darwin.

²⁵Ibid., p. 437.

²⁶Ibid.

There is no such thing as a consistent theological order in the universe. Order is a purely human invention. Nature and the universe are like a table upon which a thousand beans have been thrown. Man comes along; he can pick up a certain number of beans and leave an apparent orderly pattern on the table. Thus the only real order is supposedly man-made. Much of the world is nothing but an infinite anonymous chaos.²⁷ Man must believe in God first. This belief is an emotional leap through intellectual mist and darkness. Once a man believes in God, the intellectual proofs will come along and confirm his belief. By themselves, the intellectual arguments for God prove nothing rigorously.

In the eighteenth lecture of the Varieties James reiterates the principle of pragmatism as the great norm by which all religious experience is to be judged.²⁸ He again gives full credit to Charles Sanders Peirce as the real originator of the principle in its present form. Every difference must make a difference; every difference in theory must issue somewhere in a difference of practice. The whole validity and truth of a thought is determined by the thought's practical consequences.

James then applies the principle of pragmatism to the attributes of God to again show how it works in the religious field. The metaphysical attributes of God are unacceptable because they

²⁷Ibid., pp. 438-439.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 443-445.

have no practical consequences. The moral attributes, on the other hand, are acceptable because they have definite practical consequences.

First, the metaphysical attributes. God's aseity, immateriality, simplicity, actualized infinity, self-sufficiency and self-love are supposedly destitute of all intelligible significance. "How do such qualities as these make any definite connection with our life? And if they severally call for no distinctive adaptations of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man's religion whether they be true or false? . . . Even though these attributes were faultlessly deduced, I cannot conceive of its being of the smallest consequence to us religiously that any one of them should be true."²⁹

With the moral attributes it is another case altogether. "Pragmatically, they stand on an entirely different footing. They positively determine fear and hope and expectation, and are foundations for the saintly life."³⁰ God is holy, so He can will nothing but what is good for us. God is omnipotent, so He can secure the triumph of what is good. God knows all things, so He can see us in the dark. God is loving, so He can pardon us. God is unalterable, so we can count securely on Him. These are all qualities which have a practical connection with human life as it is

²⁹Ibid., pp. 445-446.

³⁰Ibid., p. 447.

lived from day to day. Therefore, these qualities are meaningful.

But beware, says James, of attempting to demonstrate intellectually even the moral attributes of God. They simply cannot be proved by the force of pure and logical reason. Such intellectual arguments mean nothing to the man who is deeply and emotionally disturbed about some fundamental religious question--the problem of evil, for example. Reasoning in the crucial problems of the theological field always remains something superficial and unreal. Reasoning does not touch the heart of the matter. A man must first get some sort of experience of God and take the courageous leap of belief in God. The intellect is never quite sure of itself in the religious field. "An intellect perplexed and baffled, yet a trustful sense of presence--such is the situation of the man who is sincere with himself and with the facts, but who remains religious still."³¹

Man's confession of personal sins is also to be evaluated pragmatically. The impulse to confess one's wickedness in the sight of God is one of the fundamental sentiments of religion. It is a valid impulse because it springs from man's inner need of purgation and cleansing and has as a practical consequence, the feeling that the rottenness is cast out and the right order with God is restored. Man feels that all sham and hypocrisy are finished. The sin is honestly acknowledged. Man's conscious life

³¹Ibid., p. 448.

proceeds in an aura of peace and satisfaction. These are the practical consequences which make confession of sins meaningful.³²

Prayer is also to be evaluated empirically and pragmatically. Prayer is religion in act. In prayer the soul puts itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious Ideal Power of which it feels the presence. It is the vital act by which the mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the divine. Prayer is a valid religious phenomenon because it has practical effects--at least in the mind of the one praying. A sick individual prays. He believes in God and is persuaded that help can come to him from on high. Tension is eased and the mind is more resigned as the conviction grows that divine power is there. Sometimes the body itself heals faster as a result of trustful prayer and confidence in the Ideal Power. "The fundamental religious point is that in prayer, spiritual energy, which otherwise would slumber, does become active, and spiritual work of some kind is effected really."³³ Prayer is, therefore, a valid religious experience since it has practical psychological or material effects which are experienced by the one praying.

Prayer is religion in act. But what is religion itself when it is reduced to its simplest elements? Religion is the faith-state; this includes both biological and psychological reactions

³²Ibid., pp. 462-463.

³³Ibid., p. 477.

which constitute a powerful force by which men live. Religion or the faith-state may contain very little that can be called intellectual content. The faith-state is sometimes nothing more than a half-spiritual enthusiasm and vague courage to fight the battles of life. Frequently, however, a positive intellectual content or creed is associated with the passional faith-state. The intellectual content "gets invincibly stamped in upon belief, and this explains the passionate loyalty of religious persons everywhere to the minutest details of their so widely differing creeds."³⁴ This process, by which the intellectual creed is closely linked to the passionate faith-state, is one of the most important biological functions of mankind. It is important because it inspires a man to the point of extraordinary action and persevering endurance. The passional and emotional acceptance of a religious creed acts both as a stimulant and as an anaesthetic. Man rests in and takes courage from the conclusion that a God is there to make up for the obvious helplessness and wickedness of man. God will satisfy every human need and longing. Man is thus not alone. God is always there--eternally useful for man. James favorably quotes Leuba on this idea of the usefulness of God being foremost in the mind of the religious believer: "The truth of the matter can be put in this way: God is not known, he is not understood; he is used--sometimes as meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as

³⁴Ibid., p. 506.

friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness asks for no more than that."³⁵ Thus the actual psychological end of religion is not God, but life, a larger, richer and more satisfying life.

The intellectual content or creed in all religious consciousness includes the following two elements: the existence of a feeling of uneasiness, and the existence of some solution for this uneasy feeling. Man feels uneasy in his life-situation and senses that there is something wrong with him as he naturally stands. Man is saved from this uneasiness or basic disorder by making proper connection with the higher powers in life. Man is floundering in the vast chaotic sea which we call life. God is the strong ship eminently useful for man in the chaos. Man achieves his salvation by getting into contact with God. This vital contact is primarily realized by the impulsive, non-intellectual and courageous leap which James calls religious belief. Once man takes this momentous, live and forced leap, a vast spiritual energy flows in to the personality; a new life opens out. Religious belief leads on to peace, equanimity, fortitude and sincere love. And these are the solid practical effects which make religious belief meaningful and valid.

Believe in God, says James, It is quite true that His existence cannot be logically demonstrated. Yet there is no need of a

³⁵Leuba, quoted by James in Varieties, pp. 506-507.

logical demonstration in a matter of the feelings and heart. Belief in God will verify itself by the manifest fruits of peace and courage which follow. Ultimately, God exists not because He can be intellectually proved; God exists because His existence makes a difference of fact in human life.

This is the first and last statement of James's religious pragmatism: "There is a God because His existence leads to certain practical consequences in my life." In other words, pragmatism is the ultimate criterion of religious experience.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The exposition of James's religious pragmatism is now complete. James's entire religious system rests upon the pragmatic norm. Philosophically, the system will stand or fall as the pragmatic norm stands or falls. And the pragmatic norm does not stand.

James said in the beginning of the Varieties that he was a psychologist and not a religious thinker. It is perfectly safe to agree with him on this point. His psychological descriptions of man's experience of incompleteness, misery and desire for God are very well done. His philosophical explanation of the religious experience of man is, however, definitely pragmatic and cannot be accepted by the serious thinker.

"That is true or valid which has, or can have a practical consequence in man's life." This is the hypothesis of James, which, strange to say, is never specifically proven in any of his writings. He states the principle. He rewords the principle. He applies the principle to many different cases. But he never really establishes the validity of the principle itself. According to James's own principles, the pragmatic norm itself is not permanently immutable. It must be reinterpreted and applied in the

course of man's experience. Try out the pragmatic norm, says James, and see if it does not meet all the requirements of human experience.

The author of this thesis is forced to conclude that the pragmatic norm does not meet all the requirements of human experience. The pragmatic norm is not universally true. In fact, it is not even partially true in the significant areas of scientific and philosophical thought where real knowledge is an end in itself. It is one thing to say that certain truths can have startling practical consequences. It is another (and false) thing to say that all truths must have personally realized practical consequences. James's basic error consists in failing to realize the following: a proposition or thing can be true without making a difference of fact to the individual person. A truth may have consequences; but the consequences do not make or constitute the truth.

A word must be added on James's theory of belief in God. He repeatedly maintains that the purely intellectual approach to God is neither safe nor sufficient. One must follow the heart. One must follow the "non-intellectual" impulses leading to the Divinity. This procedure would, perhaps, be valid if man's non-intellectual impulses led directly to God at all times and in all situations. That man's impulses do not always lead directly to God is a truth evident even to the beginner in psychology. If the reasoning nature of man does not help one in a philosophical approach to God, if man's intellect is not the stabilizing force in

the pressure of life, then there is nothing left as a permanent foundation for human life. One cannot depend on the emotions, for they are in a constant state of flux. One cannot depend on the will alone, for it will settle on any sort of inferior good without the direction of the intellect. One cannot depend on the passions, for they too frequently embrace the enticing pleasures of the present moment.

In short, the intellectual approach to God is the only reasonable approach. God exists, not because I want Him to exist; God exists, not because I feel that His existence will make a difference in the practical details of my life; but God exists as the intellectually perceived Cause of the visible world contacted day by day.

James successfully demolished the idea that truth is a bare relation hanging unconnected in space. The only trouble with this accomplishment is that few, if any, of the thinkers of recent philosophical history held such an opinion. Scholastic philosophy certainly does not hold it. One can safely agree with James when he says that truth is not a bare static relation hanging in space with no connection to the individual knower. To concede this, however, is not to establish the pragmatic method as the only other possibility. It is questionable whether James ever fully understood scholastic realism or epistemology. His caricature of the scholastic teaching on objective evidence is amusing, but not based on fact.

Real epistemological truth--cognitive truth--is indeed conformity of the intellect with reality. This intentional or representative conformity is a relation, but a relation with a definite subject, terminus and foundation. The subject of the truth-relation is the intellect acting according to its judging capacity; the terminus of the truth-relation is the reality to be actually known according to the existence proper to it; the foundation of the truth-relation is the form of the known reality existing in the intellect.

Thus truth has a relation to the individual person, but is not constituted by the individual's practical needs and desires.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by **Thomas F. Ankenbrandt, S.J.**,
has been read and approved by three members of the Department of
Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the
thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact
that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the
thesis is now given final approval with reference to content,
form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Sept. 9, 1959
Date

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